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Admiral on the Potomac

It is disquieting to learn that President Johnson has decided to reverse the practice of the past 12 years and replace a civilian with a military man as the head of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Vice Admiral William F. Raborn Jr. retired from the Navy 2½ years ago with the reputation of having an inventive mind and being a careful administrator. He is credited with developing the Navy's Polaris system for shooting nuclear missiles from submarines. The Admiral was born 59 years ago in Texas and he was an outspoken Johnson supporter in last year's election.

Administration officials insist that the Admiral's selection represents no attempt to give CIA a military cast, something it hasn't had since Gen. Walter Bedell Smith stepped out as director in 1953. And they note that an extremely able CIA veteran, Richard Helms, has been put in to replace a military man, Lt. Gen. Marshall S. Carter, as CIA's deputy director.

But in an Administration where the Pentagon already has so many advantages in budget, personnel and friends on Capitol Hill, and Mr. McNamara as the Cabinet's most forceful personality, is it wise to have a recently retired Admiral in the key slot of supervising intelligence and covert operations? Has the Admiral's training, in science and the military, given him the requisite experience to deal with popular political movements other than last November's election in America?

Perhaps so. Admiral Raborn certainly will and should have the opportunity to prove our doubts unfounded. But as long as the CIA is the one major branch of our Government to escape unwatched by the traditional system of checks and balances imbedded in the executive branch's relations with the legislative and the judiciary, we think civilian administrators of the Agency desirable.